



# Northern Rockies Interagency Coordination Center

## NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

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### **SMOKE EXPECTED TO LINGER ACROSS INTERMOUNTAIN WEST**

MISSOULA, MONT., September 7, 2006— Residents across much of north Idaho and Montana will have to live with smoke from wildland fires a bit longer, according to Tom Maloney, chair of the multi-agency coordination fire management group in Missoula. “The smoke we’ve been living with over the past few days is likely to continue unless we have a significant change in the current weather patterns,” Maloney said. “Over the past several days, smoke from wildfires in Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington has settled into the Missoula and Bitterroot valleys,” he said. The area between Bozeman and Billings has also been impacted by smoke from the Derby Fire and the Paradise Valley Complex.

Thomas Dzomba, air quality and smoke management specialist for the Forest Service’s Northern Region, said that the smoke, combined with poor dispersion conditions and strong nighttime inversions, has caused moderate to unhealthy air quality conditions. A frontal system is forecasted to move through the region this weekend which may provide some relief from the smoke conditions.

However, Dzomba cautioned, after the frontal passage, the dry, stagnant conditions are expected to build back into the region. “The weather pattern that has been pushing the smoke into our valleys is a high pressure system which traps the smoke near the valley floor, preventing the smoke dispersion that area residents would hope to see,” Dzomba said.

There are currently 24 uncontained large wildland fires burning in the Northwest and Northern Rockies geographic areas, according to today’s situation report compiled by the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise. Those large fires remind us of the reality that residents of the intermountain West already know: it is September and, based on past and recent history, we know this area burns.

Maloney said that although fire managers would like to be able to put out all the fires that burn near communities, it’s just not possible. “The interagency fire management group works hard to put the available resources in the right places, based on priority and need,” he said. He added that it is unfortunate that some communities end up living with smoke a bit longer than others this time of year.

Maloney emphasized that the extended drought that we are experiencing is a result of 14 years of very low levels of precipitation. “Couple the drought with the build up of fuels in the forests across this area, and we’ve got some good burning conditions that can create significant amounts of smoke,” he added.

To help people know the level of concern they should have regarding the smoke, Dzomba offered the following visibility guidelines:

Visibility Ranges Used to Determine Health Effect Categories	
Visibility Range	Health Effect Category
10 miles and up	<u>Good</u>
6 miles to 9 miles	<u>Moderate</u>
3 miles to 5 miles	<u>Unhealthy For Sensitive Groups</u>
1.5 to 2.5 miles	<u>Unhealthy</u>
0.9 to 1.4 miles	<u>Very Unhealthy</u>
0.8 miles or less	<u>Hazardous</u>

The procedure for making personal observation to estimate the forest fire smoke index value for is:

1. Face away from the sun.
2. Determine the limit of your visible range by looking for targets at known distances (miles).
3. Visible range is that point at which even high contrast objects totally disappear.
4. Use the values above to determine the local forest fire smoke category.

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